

ANNUAL REPORT

Office of the Student Ombudsperson

The University of Chicago

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The Office of the Student Ombudsperson was established in 1968 to provide students with a neutral, independent, peer-provided source of information and help in navigating the University. While the Office continues exploring ways to improve the service it provides, the primary aim of the Office remains constant: first, to provide students with information they have difficulty accessing themselves, and second, to facilitate the resolution of student concerns involving faculty, administrators, or—less commonly—other students.

In 2018-2019, the Office of the Student Ombudsperson underwent several significant changes. These included welcoming Jon Bullock as Associate Student Ombudsperson and undertaking new procedures for tracking student inquiries and managing caseloads. During Winter Break, the Office of the Student Ombudsperson also moved to its new location in the Edelstone Center. As with any period of change, these various transitions resulted in a few difficulties such as problems accessing student requests for a short time; fortunately, these issues have since been resolved.

Throughout the course of the academic year, the Office received approximately 50 inquiries from a wide-ranging body of undergraduates, doctoral students, professional students, and even faculty. Inquiries from graduate students in particular came from students in all divisions, including the Humanities Division, the Divinity School, the Social Sciences Division, and the Biological/Physical Sciences Divisions.

Students came to the Office with a wide array of issues, including academic problems such as grading procedures, grade appeals, course bidding procedures, and graduation requirements. As such, the Office encourages faculty to remain as clear as possible with their evaluation procedures and performance expectations. The Office also recommends that departments and/or divisions implement formal grade appeal procedures when and where possible.

In a similar vein, a number of doctoral students came to the Office looking for help resolving interpersonal disputes among members of their dissertation committees. These problems are particularly challenging to address, and can result in significant strain to students. As such, the Office strongly recommends that in the interest of supporting student progress in the advanced stages of their studies, each department or division considers the implementation of resources for committee management for their students.

There were also several cases concerning harassment and/or discrimination. In addition to serving as a resource for students looking for information on reporting these types of complaints, both members of the Office of the Student Ombudsperson alternately participated as ex officio members of the Panel on Unlawful Harassment throughout the school year. In regard to cases involving harassment and/or discrimination of any kind, the Office encourages the University to continue

their efforts in publicizing the roles of the Title IX Office and other relevant entities. We also encourage continued transparency about the investigative process on behalf of both the complainant and the respondent.

In sum, the new procedures implemented for case management in the 2018-19 academic year were ultimately successful in laying the groundwork for continued (and improved) effectiveness in the future. The Office will also continue to search for better insight into trends in student complaints and resolutions while maintaining rigorous standards of confidentiality and neutrality. As such, these procedures will be continued in the 2019-20 academic year and used to develop training materials and other resources for the Office of the Student Ombudsperson.